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DOCTOR STRANGE®

IN THE MURKY DEPTHS OF SIBYL'S CAVE, STRANGE AND CLEA FACE THEIR GREATEST CHALLENGE!

REALITY WAR!

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Once he was a man like most *others*— a *worldly* man, seduced and jaded by *material*-things. But then he discovered the *separate* reality, where *sorcery* and *men's souls* shaped the forces that shape our *lives*. In that instant, he was *born again*, to become a man like no other!

STAN LEE PRESENTS: Dr. STRANGE MASTER OF THE MYSTIC ARTS!™

BILL KUNKEL PLOT | DAVID MICHELINIE SCRIPT | KERRY GAMMILL PENCILS | AL MILGROM - INKS, D. ALBERS - LETTERS, B. SHAREN - COLORS | JO DUFFY & AL MILGROM - EDITORS, JIM SHOOTER - EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

NEW YORK'S J.F.K. AIRPORT, WHERE THE MYSTICAL DR. STEPHEN STRANGE AND HIS DISCIPLE-CUM-LOVER, CLEA HAVE ARRIVED FOR THE FIRST LEG OF WHAT IS OSTENSIBLY TO BE A RELAXING AND REVIVIFYING VACATION IN ROME.
YES... OSTENSIBLY.
I STILL DON'T KNOW WHAT POSSESSED ME TO SUGGEST A HOLIDAY, STEPHEN, BUT I'M GLAD I DID. THIS-- "AIRPORT" DID YOU CALL IT?-- IS SO UNLIKE ANYTHING ON MY HOME WORLD.
THERE'S SO MUCH LIFE HERE, SO MANY PEOPLE, SUCH ACTIVITY. DON'T YOU FIND IT EXCITING?
ROME
THE ETERNAL CITY
8 FLIGHTS DAILY
NO.
THE REALITY WAR

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I'VE NEVER BEEN AT EASE IN CROWDS, CLEA. BUT YOU MAKE SO FEW REQUESTS--
--THAT I'M HAPPY TO ENDURE EVEN HERDS OF ELBOWING TOURISTS TO INDULGE YOU IN THIS ONE.
NOTICE
FLIGHT NO. TIME
274 LONDON 5:10
218 PARIS 5:25
311 ROM
THAT'S FLIGHT 311 FOR ROME, SIR, NOW BOARDING AT GATE 4.
THERE'S THE GATE, MY LOVE. LET'S HURRY!
I DIDN'T WANT TO ALARM CLEA, BUT THERE'S MORE THAN INDULGENCE IN MY AGREEING TO THIS JOURNEY. I'VE SENSED SOMETHING OF LATE IN HER PSYCHIC AURA, A RIPPLE THAT I CAN'T--
METAL DETECTOR
PLEASE REMOVE ALL METAL ITEMS BEFORE ENTERING.
--WHAT?!
I'M AFRAID YOU'VE SET OFF OUR METAL DETECTOR, SIR. WOULD YOU MIND REMOVING ALL METALLIC ARTICLES FROM YOUR PERSON AND PLACING THEM IN THIS RECEPTACLE?
BZZZZZZZZZZZ
GATES
WHY, CERTAINLY, MISS. THERE, THAT SHOULD TAKE CARE OF--
--EH? BUT WHAT COULD--?
BZZZZZZ
IT APPEARS, STEPHEN, THAT THE SPELLS YOU CAST TO CONCEAL THE MYSTIC EYE OF AGAMOTTO FROM PRYING EYES--
--DO LITTLE TO GUARD IT FROM PRYING MACHINES.
HMM, YES, WELL...
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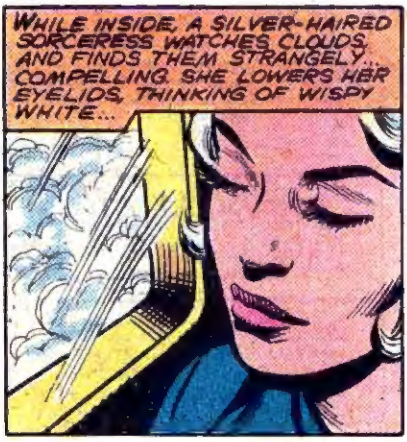
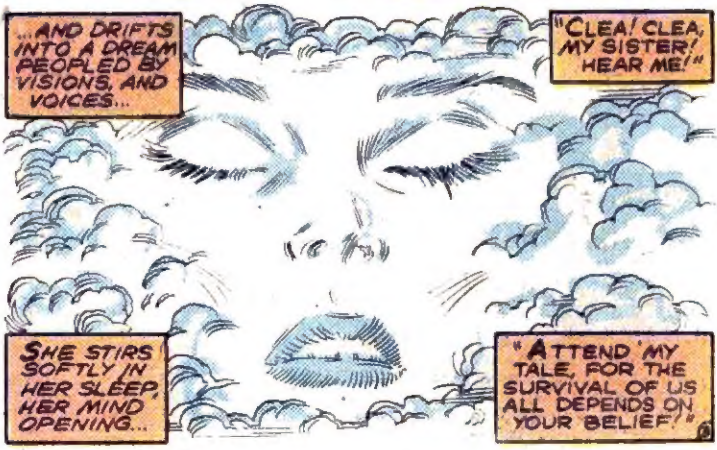
WHAT SEEMS TO BE THE PROBLEM HERE?
OH, NO PROBLEM, OFFICER, I ASSURE YOU. IT'S JUST THAT I WAS IN A BIT OF A RUSH AND FORGOT ALL ABOUT MY--

--ST. CHRISTOPHER MEDAL. I ALWAYS CARRY IT WHEN I TRAVEL-- I FIND IT MOST COMFORTING. SORRY.
SAINT CHRISTOPHER

AND SOON...
THAT WAS A CLEVER RUSE, STEPHEN, CASTING A SPELL OF ILLUSION ABOUT THE EYE.
IT WOULD HAVE BEEN MORE CLEVER HAD IT BEEN THOUGHT OF BEFORE IT WAS NEEDED.
TIME THE NEW ROME
BUT THANK YOU, NEVERTHELESS.

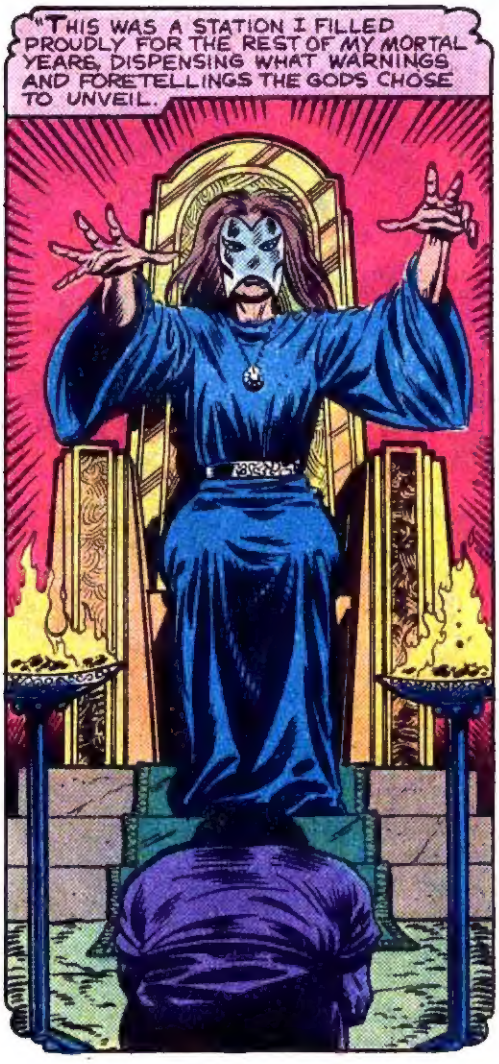
AND MOMENTS LATER, THE GLITTERING 747 ROARS DOWN THE TARMAC, THEN LIFTS INTO THE AIR WITH A SUBDUED "THUMP", ITS NOSE POINTED OBEDIENTLY EASTWARD.

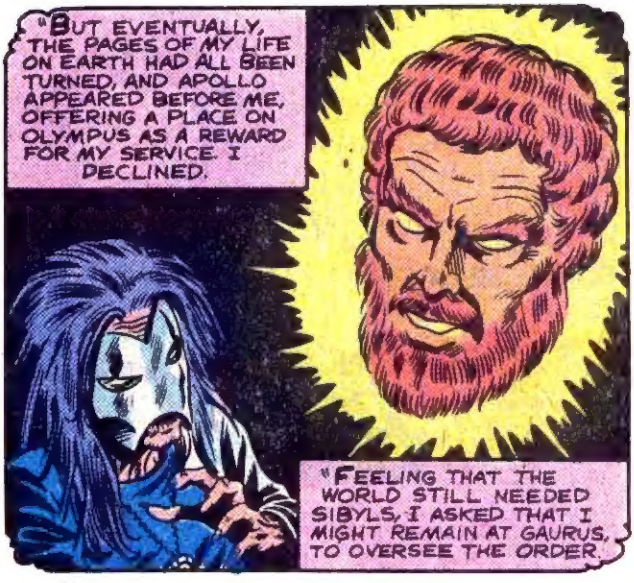

WHILE INSIDE, A SILVER-HAIRED SORCERESS WATCHES CLOUDS, AND FINDS THEM STRANGELY... COMPELLING. SHE LOWERS HER EYELIDS, THINKING OF WISPY WHITE...


...AND DRIFTS INTO A DREAM PEOPLED BY VISIONS, AND VOICES...
"CLEA! CLEA, MY SISTER! HEAR ME!"
SHE STIRS SOFTLY IN HER SLEEP, HER MIND OPENING...
"ATTEND MY TALE, FOR THE SURVIVAL OF US ALL DEPENDS ON YOUR BELIEF!"

THE DREAM CONTINUES, THE NARRATIVE FLOWS:
"I AM SIBYLLA, FOUNDER OF AN ANCIENT ORDER OF PROPHETS KNOWN AS THE SIBYLS. I BEGAN AS A SEERESS IN ROME OVER 2,000 YEARS AGO, BUT AS MY ABILITIES GREW, MY CELEBRITY SPREAD BEYOND THAT NOBLE CITY--

"REACHING AT LAST TO THE HOME OF THE GODS THEMSELVES! THUS, IN MY ADOLESCENCE, I WAS SUMMONED TO MT. GAURUS, TEMPLE OF APOLLO AND DIANA--
"--WHERE I WAS TOLD THAT I HAD BEEN CHOSEN AS THEIR VASSAL, TO SPEAK THEIR ORACLES TO THE PEOPLE.


"THIS WAS A STATION I FILLED PROUDLY FOR THE REST OF MY MORTAL YEARS, DISPENSING WHAT WARNINGS AND FORETELLINGS THE GODS CHOSE TO UNVEIL.


"BUT EVENTUALLY, THE PAGES OF MY LIFE ON EARTH HAD ALL BEEN TURNED, AND APOLLO APPEARED BEFORE ME, OFFERING A PLACE ON OLYMPUS AS A REWARD FOR MY SERVICE. I DECLINED.
"FEELING THAT THE WORLD STILL NEEDED SIBYLS, I ASKED THAT I MIGHT REMAIN AT GAURUS, TO OVERSEE THE ORDER.

"AND IN HIS WISDOM, APOLLO SAW FIT TO GRANT THAT REQUEST, ALLOWING MY SPIRIT TO RISE AND SURVIVE EVEN AS MY CORPOREAL FORM WITHERED AND DWINDLED INTO DUST.

"FOR CENTURIES, I DWELT IN THE CAVERN TEMPLE, ADVISING AND ASSURING EACH NEW SIBYL--
"--AND FOR CENTURIES, IT WENT WELL.
"BUT AS ALL THINGS MUST PASS, SO DID THE SIBYLLINE SISTERHOOD BEGIN TO FALTER.
"FOR THE LAST SIBYL, THALEIA, WAS MAD, AND BEGAN OFFERING HER OWN FRENZIED VISIONS AS THE EDICTS OF THE GODS.
"FAITH IN THE SIBYLS DECLINED RAPIDLY, AND WHEN THALEIA TOOK HER OWN LIFE WITH A CHALICE OF POISON WINE, THE ORDER OF SIBYLS DIED WITH HER.
"BUT APOLLO WAS NOT CONTENT WITH EITHER DEATH, FOR THE FINAL PROPHECY-- THE BLACK ORACLE-- HAD YET TO BE SPOKEN AND WHEN ITS TIME CAME, A TRIAD-- THE LINKED POWER OF THREE SIBYLS-- WOULD BE REQUIRED TO AVERT AN ALMOST UNIMAGINABLE DOOM.
"AND SO AT THE PRECISE INSTANT OF DEATH, APOLLO SEALED THALEIA'S SPIRIT, AND HER POWER, WITHIN THE SEERESS' CORPSE, IN THE HOPE THAT WHEN THE BLACK ORACLE CAME TO PASS, THE LAST OF THE SIBYLS WOULD REDEEM HERSELF.
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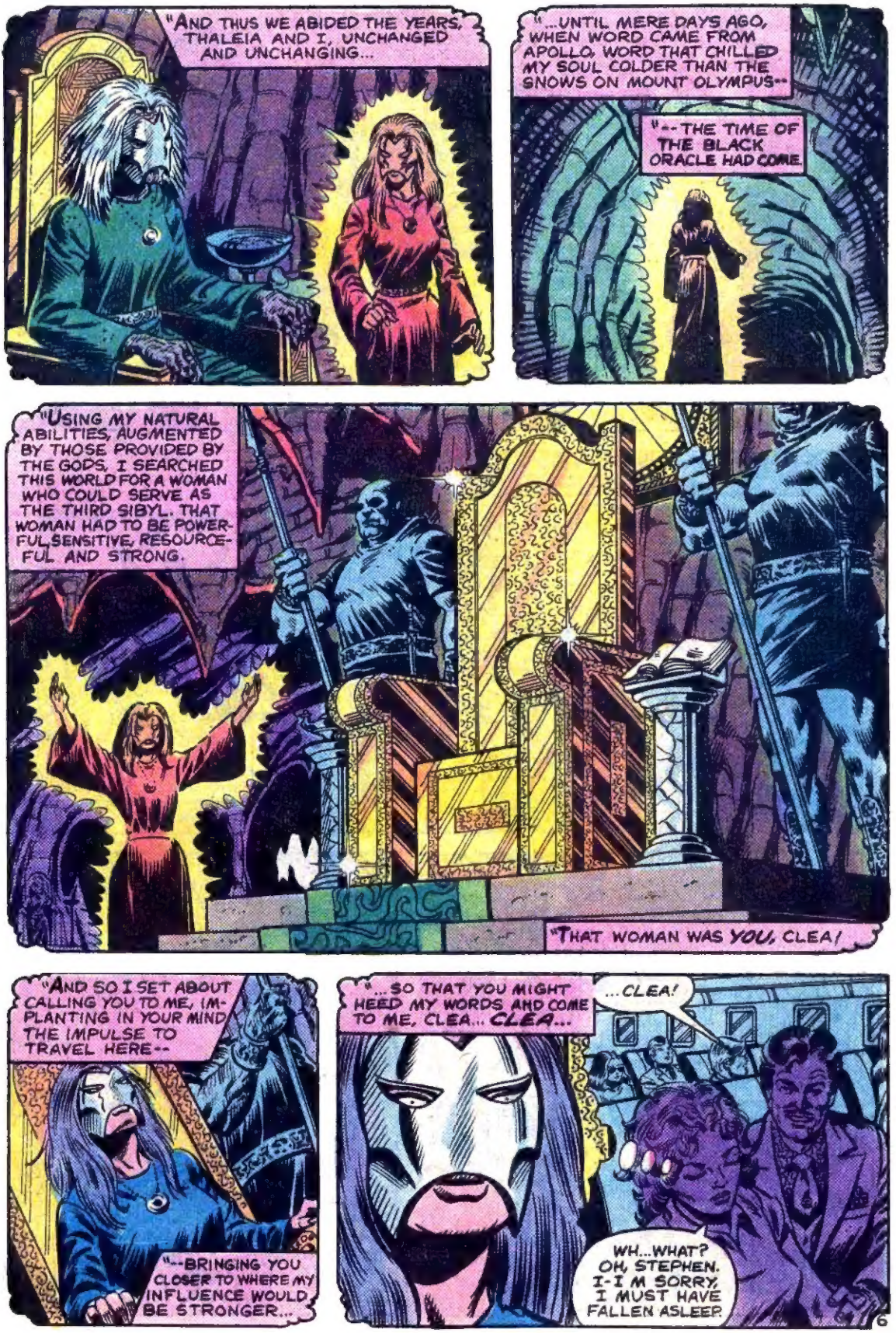
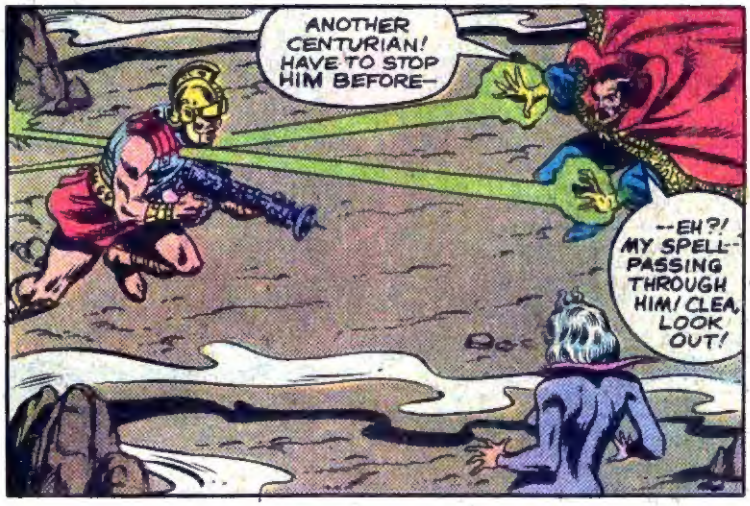

"AND THUS WE ABIDED THE YEARS, THALEIA AND I, UNCHANGED AND UNCHANGING...
"...UNTIL MERE DAYS AGO, WHEN WORD CAME FROM APOLLO, WORD THAT CHILLED MY SOUL COLDER THAN THE SNOWS ON MOUNT OLYMPUS--
"--THE TIME OF THE BLACK ORACLE HAD COME.
"USING MY NATURAL ABILITIES, AUGMENTED BY THOSE PROVIDED BY THE GODS, I SEARCHED THIS WORLD FOR A WOMAN WHO COULD SERVE AS THE THIRD SIBYL. THAT WOMAN HAD TO BE POWERFUL, SENSITIVE, RESOURCEFUL AND STRONG.
"THAT WOMAN WAS YOU, CLEA!
"AND SO I SET ABOUT CALLING YOU TO ME, IMPLANTING IN YOUR MIND THE IMPULSE TO TRAVEL HERE--
"--BRINGING YOU CLOSER TO WHERE MY INFLUENCE WOULD BE STRONGER...
"...SO THAT YOU MIGHT HEED MY WORDS AND COME TO ME, CLEA... CLEA...
...CLEA!
WH...WHAT? OH, STEPHEN. I-I M SORRY, I MUST HAVE FALLEN ASLEEP.

ENJOY YOUR STAY IN ROME, SIR.
YOU SLEPT THROUGH THE ENTIRE FLIGHT, CLEA, ALMOST AS IF YOU WERE IN A TRANCE.
ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?
I... I THINK SO. IT'S JUST THAT I HAD A DREAM, ONE THAT WAS VERY REAL... AND VERY UNSETTLING.
BUT AS THE TWO TRAVELERS GAIN THE AIRPORT LOBBY, THEY FIND SOMETHING EVEN MORE UNSETTLING!
WHA--ROMAN CENTURIANS? WITH LASER RIFLES?!
STEPHEN! THERE IS DANGER HERE! WE MUST CAST SPELLS OF PROTECTION BEFORE--
BEFORE WHAT? THIS?
A CRACKLING NIMBUS! ENGULFING US!
OR PERHAPS--
--THIS!
BY THE VISHANTI! WE'VE BEEN TRANSPORTED FROM THE TERMINAL! AND OUR STREET RAIMENT HAS GIVEN WAY TO OUR MYSTIC GARB!
THAT TEMPLE, STEPHEN! I RECOGNIZE IT! THIS IS MT. GAURUS!
AND THAT IS THE HALL OF THE SIBYLS. I CAN'T EXPLAIN, BUT I KNOW THAT THE ANSWERS TO MY DREAM LIE THERE. WE MUST ENTER.
THEN ENTER WE WILL, MY LOVE. BUT CAREFULLY...

AND SOON, INSIDE...
THESE VAPORS SEEM TO HAVE A LIFE OF THEIR OWN, STEPHEN. I SEE FACES, FORMS...
AS DO I. IT'S AS THOUGH THE PAST WERE A PALPABLE THING IN THIS CAVERN, BRUSHING THE PRESENT WITH TRANSIENT TOUCHES. THERE ARE DARK NAMES AT WORK HERE. WE MUST--

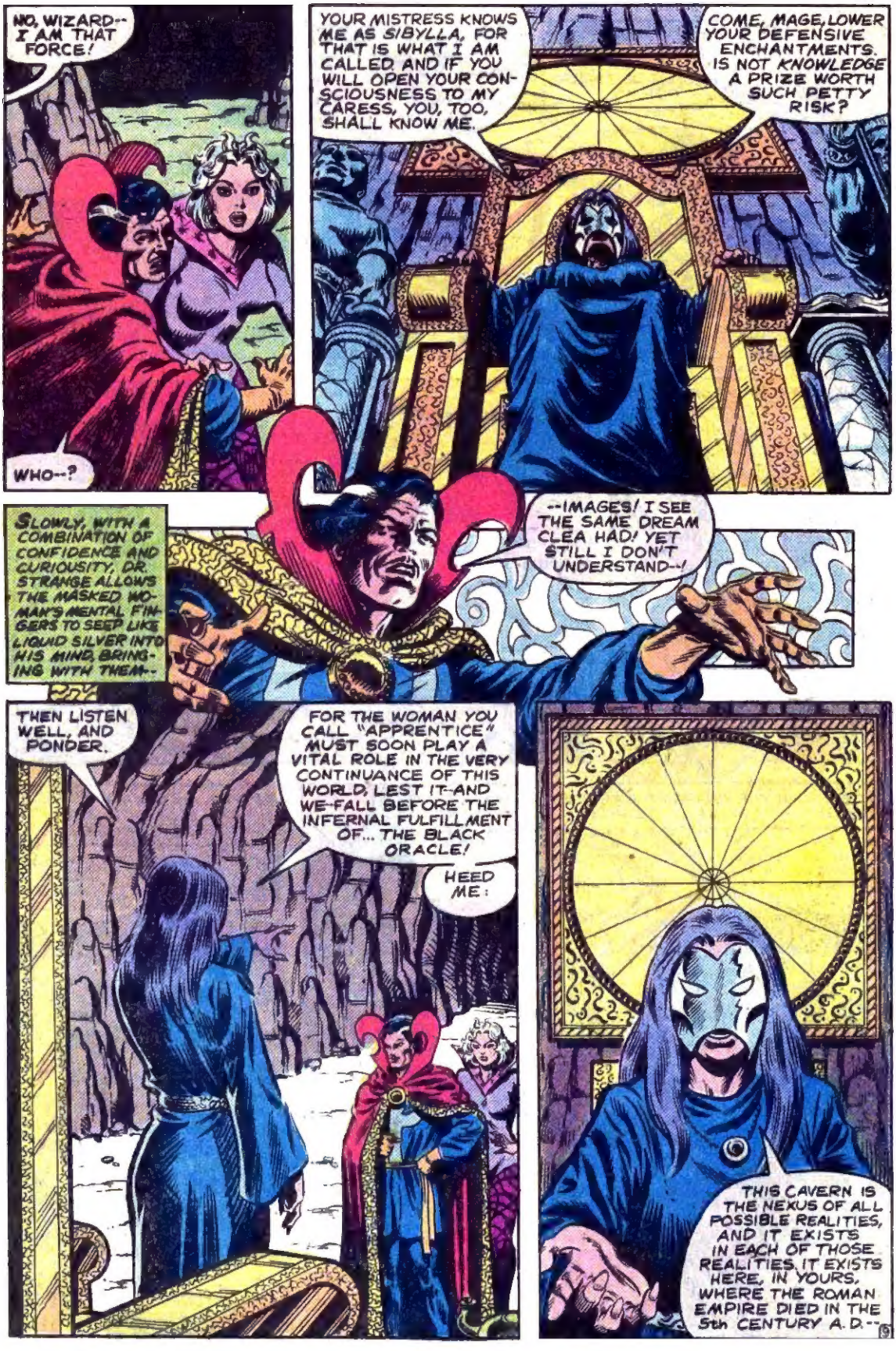
SUDDENLY FROM OUT OF THE FOG...
DIE, SARACEN PIG! DIE FOR THE EMPIRE OF TIBERIUS EXETER!

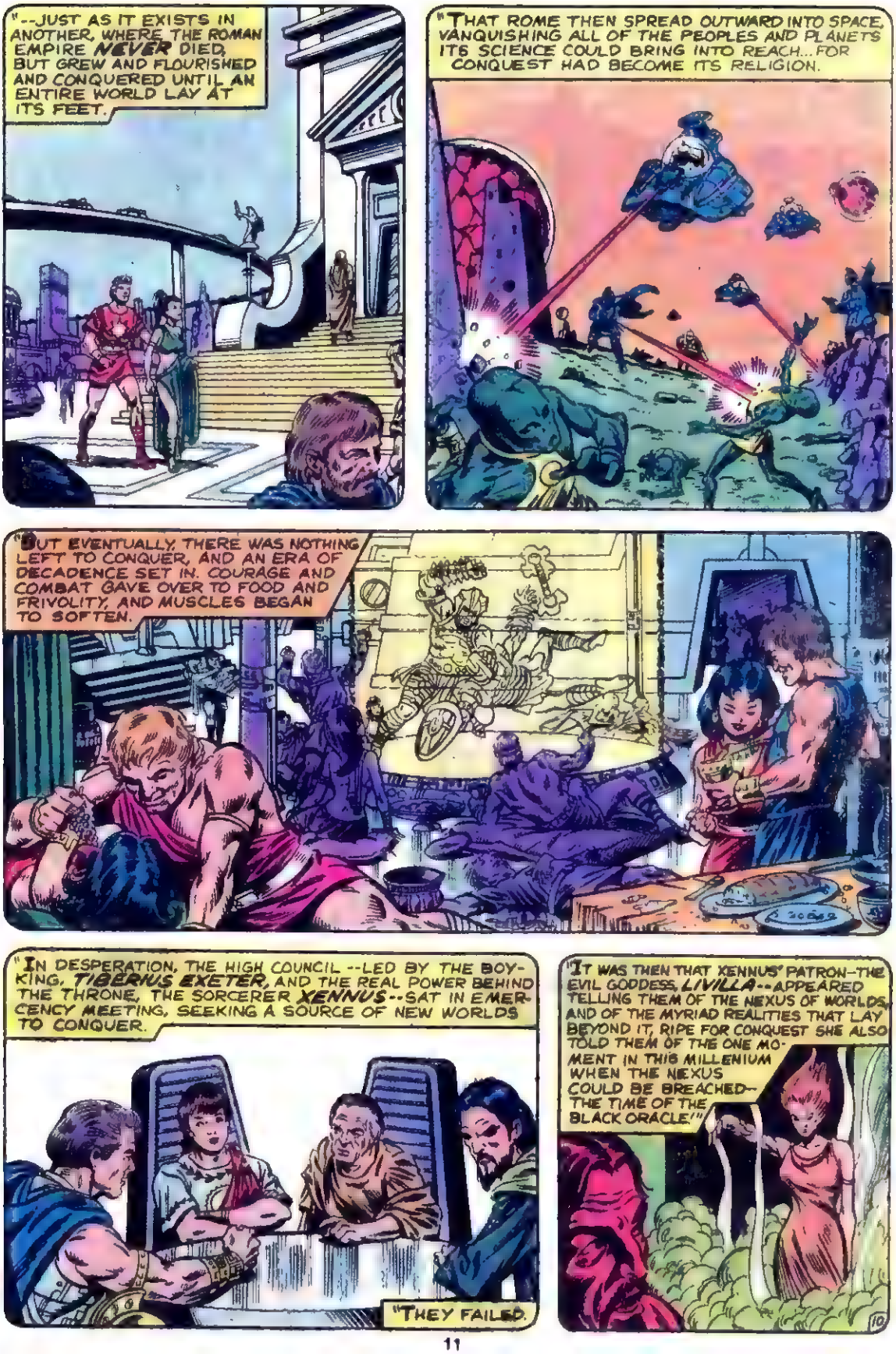

ANOTHER CENTURIAN! HAVE TO STOP HIM BEFORE--
--EH?! MY SPELL-- PASSING THROUGH HIM! CLEA, LOOK OUT!

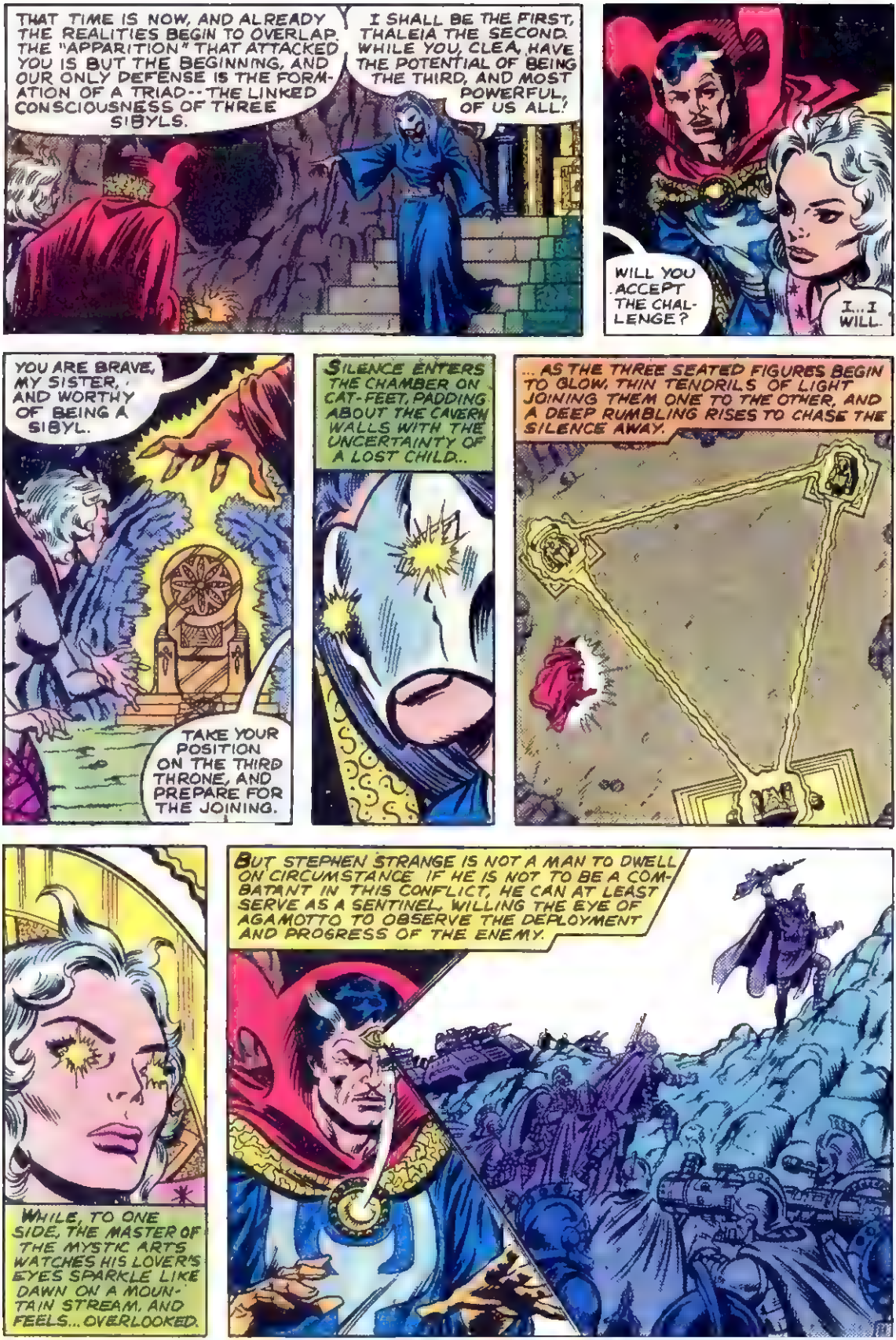
BUT EVEN AS THE CHARGING WARRIOR TRIGGERS HIS UNLIKELY WEAPON...
HE...HE'S FADING AWAY! DISAPPEARING LIKE SOME... GHOST!

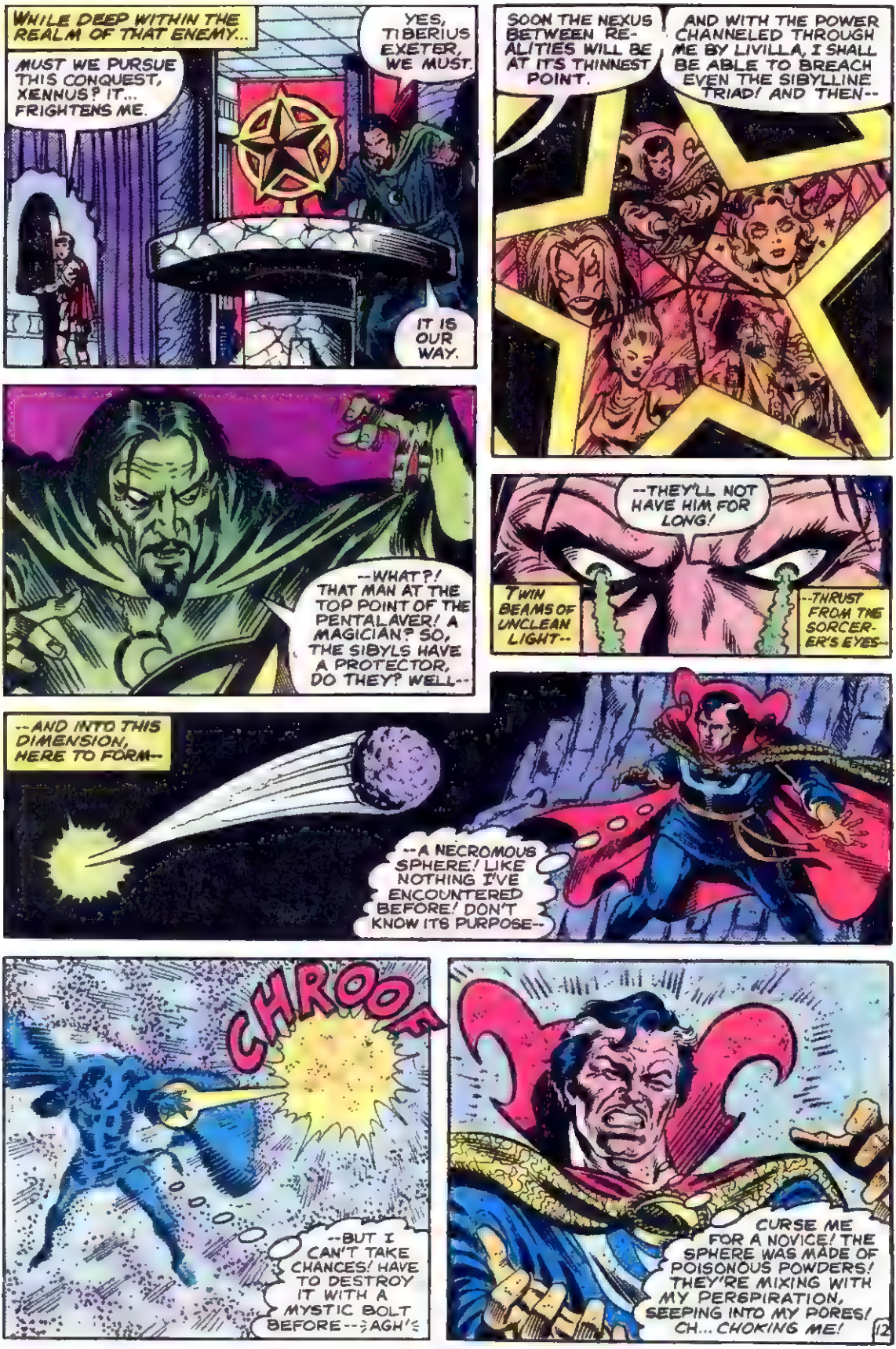
NO, HIS PRESENCE WAS REAL ENOUGH-- AS WAS THE DANGER HE PRESENTED!
AND WE MUST FIND THE SOURCE OF BOTH!
COME, THERE'S LIGHT AHEAD. A GROTTO OF SOME SORT.

AND AS MASTER AND DISCIPLE STRIDE INTO A WIDER PASSAGEWAY...
A CORPSE! IT'S THALEIA, THE LAST OF THE SIBYLS!
I SENSE POWER LOCKED WITHIN THE BODY. COULD THAT POSSIBLY BE THE FORCE THAT BROUGHT US HERE?


NO, WIZARD--I AM THAT FORCE!
WHO--?
YOUR MISTRESS KNOWS ME AS SIBYLLA, FOR THAT IS WHAT I AM CALLED. AND IF YOU WILL OPEN YOUR CONSCIOUSNESS TO MY CARESS, YOU, TOO, SHALL KNOW ME.
COME, MAGE, LOWER YOUR DEFENSIVE ENCHANTMENTS. IS NOT KNOWLEDGE A PRIZE WORTH SUCH PETTY RISK?
SLOWLY, WITH A COMBINATION OF CONFIDENCE AND CURIOUSITY, DR. STRANGE ALLOWS THE MASKED WOMAN'S MENTAL FINGERS TO SEEP LIKE LIQUID SILVER INTO HIS MIND, BRINGING WITH THEM--
--IMAGES! I SEE THE SAME DREAM CLEA HAD! YET STILL I DON'T UNDERSTAND--!
THEN LISTEN WELL, AND PONDER.
FOR THE WOMAN YOU CALL "APPRENTICE" MUST SOON PLAY A VITAL ROLE IN THE VERY CONTINUANCE OF THIS WORLD, LEST IT--AND WE--FALL BEFORE THE INFERNAL FULFILLMENT OF... THE BLACK ORACLE!
HEED ME:
THIS CAVERN IS THE NEXUS OF ALL POSSIBLE REALITIES, AND IT EXISTS IN EACH OF THOSE REALITIES. IT EXISTS HERE, IN YOURS, WHERE THE ROMAN EMPIRE DIED IN THE 5th CENTURY A.D.--

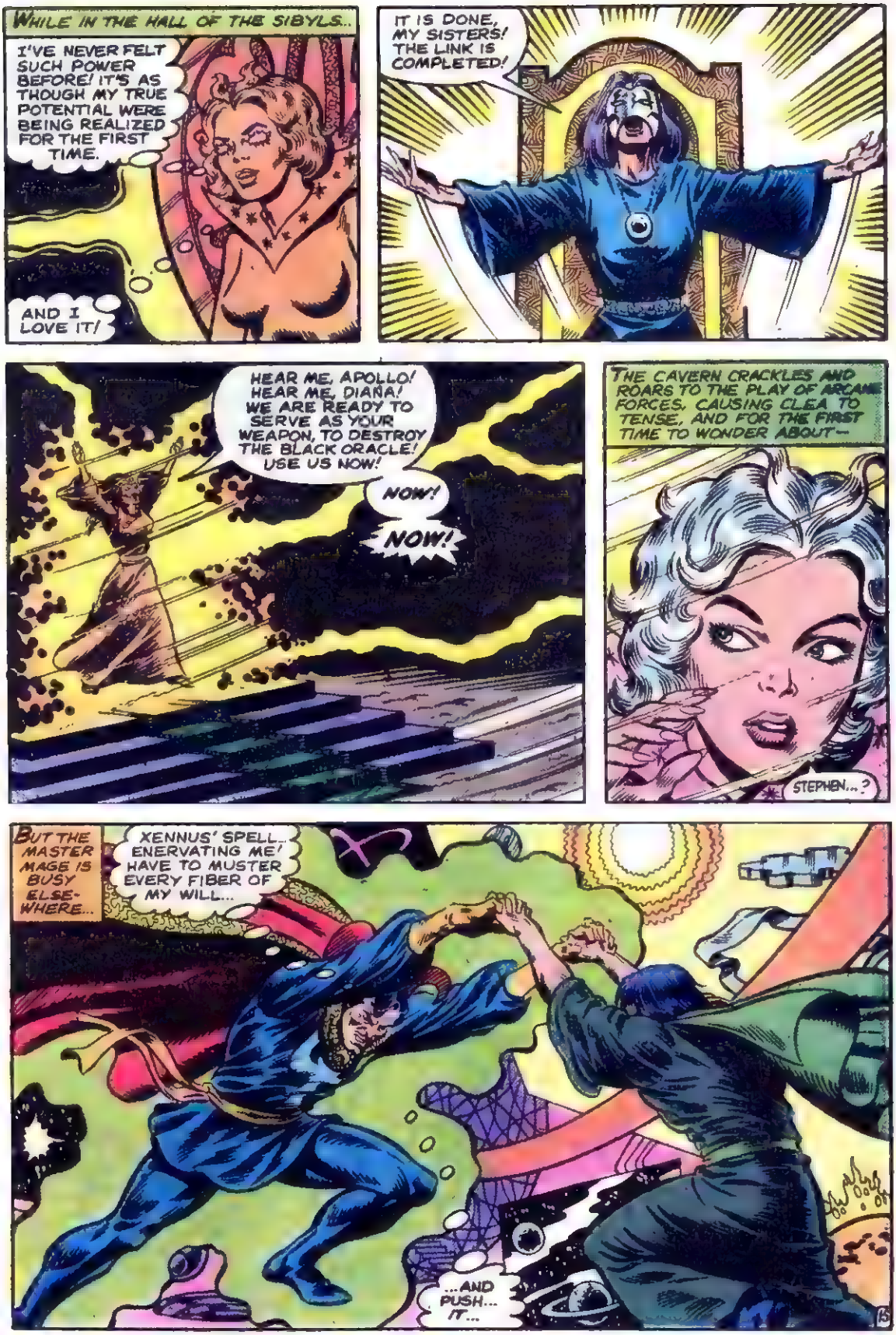

"--JUST AS IT EXISTS IN ANOTHER, WHERE THE ROMAN EMPIRE NEVER DIED, BUT GREW AND FLOURISHED AND CONQUERED UNTIL AN ENTIRE WORLD LAY AT ITS FEET.
"THAT ROME THEN SPREAD OUTWARD INTO SPACE, VANQUISHING ALL OF THE PEOPLES AND PLANETS ITS SCIENCE COULD BRING INTO REACH... FOR CONQUEST HAD BECOME ITS RELIGION.
"BUT EVENTUALLY, THERE WAS NOTHING LEFT TO CONQUER, AND AN ERA OF DECADENCE SET IN. COURAGE AND COMBAT GAVE OVER TO FOOD AND FRIVOLITY, AND MUSCLES BEGAN TO SOFTEN.
"IN DESPERATION, THE HIGH COUNCIL --LED BY THE BOY-KING, TIBERIUS EXETER, AND THE REAL POWER BEHIND THE THRONE, THE SORCERER XENNUS--SAT IN EMERGENCY MEETING, SEEKING A SOURCE OF NEW WORLDS TO CONQUER.
"THEY FAILED.
"IT WAS THEN THAT XENNUS' PATRON--THE EVIL GODDESS, LIVILLA--APPEARED TELLING THEM OF THE NEXUS OF WORLDS, AND OF THE MYRIAD REALITIES THAT LAY BEYOND IT, RIPE FOR CONQUEST. SHE ALSO TOLD THEM OF THE ONE MOMENT IN THIS MILLENIUM WHEN THE NEXUS COULD BE BREACHED--THE TIME OF THE BLACK ORACLE!"


THAT TIME IS NOW, AND ALREADY THE REALITIES BEGIN TO OVERLAP. THE "APPARITION" THAT ATTACKED YOU IS BUT THE BEGINNING, AND OUR ONLY DEFENSE IS THE FORMATION OF A TRIAD--THE LINKED CONSCIOUSNESS OF THREE SIBYLS.
I SHALL BE THE FIRST, THALEIA THE SECOND. WHILE YOU, CLEA, HAVE THE POTENTIAL OF BEING THE THIRD, AND MOST POWERFUL, OF US ALL!
WILL YOU ACCEPT THE CHALLENGE?
I...I WILL.
YOU ARE BRAVE, MY SISTER, AND WORTHY OF BEING A SIBYL.
TAKE YOUR POSITION ON THE THIRD THRONE, AND PREPARE FOR THE JOINING.
SILENCE ENTERS THE CHAMBER ON CAT-FEET, PADDING ABOUT THE CAVERN WALLS WITH THE UNCERTAINTY OF A LOST CHILD...
...AS THE THREE SEATED FIGURES BEGIN TO GLOW, THIN TENDRILS OF LIGHT JOINING THEM ONE TO THE OTHER, AND A DEEP RUMBLING RISES TO CHASE THE SILENCE AWAY.
WHILE, TO ONE SIDE, THE MASTER OF THE MYSTIC ARTS WATCHES HIS LOVER'S EYES SPARKLE LIKE DAWN ON A MOUNTAIN STREAM, AND FEELS...OVERLOOKED.
BUT STEPHEN STRANGE IS NOT A MAN TO DWELL ON CIRCUMSTANCE. IF HE IS NOT TO BE A COMBATANT IN THIS CONFLICT, HE CAN AT LEAST SERVE AS A SENTINEL, WILLING THE EYE OF AGAMOTTO TO OBSERVE THE DEPLOYMENT AND PROGRESS OF THE ENEMY.


WHILE DEEP WITHIN THE REALM OF THAT ENEMY...
MUST WE PURSUE THIS CONQUEST, XENNUS? IT... FRIGHTENS ME.
YES, TIBERIUS EXETER, WE MUST.
IT IS OUR WAY.
SOON THE NEXUS BETWEEN REALITIES WILL BE AT ITS THINNEST POINT.
AND WITH THE POWER CHANNELED THROUGH ME BY LIVILLA, I SHALL BE ABLE TO BREACH EVEN THE SIBYLLINE TRIAD! AND THEN--
--WHAT?! THAT MAN AT THE TOP POINT OF THE PENTALAVER! A MAGICIAN? SO, THE SIBYLS HAVE A PROTECTOR, DO THEY? WELL--
--THEY'LL NOT HAVE HIM FOR LONG!
TWIN BEAMS OF UNCLEAN LIGHT--
--THRUST FROM THE SORCERER'S EYES--
--AND INTO THIS DIMENSION, HERE TO FORM--
--A NECROMOUS SPHERE! LIKE NOTHING I'VE ENCOUNTERED BEFORE! DON'T KNOW ITS PURPOSE--
CHROOF
--BUT I CAN'T TAKE CHANCES! HAVE TO DESTROY IT WITH A MYSTIC BOLT BEFORE--AGH!
CURSE ME FOR A NOVICE! THE SPHERE WAS MADE OF POISONOUS POWDERS! THEY'RE MIXING WITH MY PERSPIRATION, SEEPING INTO MY PORES! CH... CHOKING ME!
12

EXCELLENT! THE MAGICIAN WAS TAKEN UNAWARES! HIS DEMISE IS INEVITABLE!
AND, THEN, TIBERIUS EXETER, HIS WORLD SHALL BE OURS!
THAT... THAT'S FINE, XENNUS. C-CARRY ON.
AND SO, BEFORE MT. GAURUS...
READY YOUR TROOPS, VARUS! THE TIME FOR CONQUEST HAS COME!
BUT AT THAT SAME MOMENT, A WORLD AWAY...
THANK OSHTUR! MY SPELL OF PURIFICATION IS WORKING... CLEANSING MY PORES!
WHA--NO! YOU'LL NOT ESCAPE MY GRASP THAT EASILY, ENCHANTER! NOR WILL YOU ESCAPE MY POWER!
THE MISTS! THEY GROW HEAVIER, THICKER. AND THEY SMELL OF... DEATH!
THIS HAS TO BE THE WORK OF XENNUS, THE SORCERER SIBYLLA SPOKE OF!
I'VE GOT TO DISPERSE THE MISTS QUICKLY--AND THEN STAND AGAINST THEIR CREATOR!

HELP ME, MIGHTY EYE OF AGAMOTTO! HELP ME TO FIND THE AUTHOR OF THESE NEFARIOUS PLOYS--
"--AND TO DRAW HIM, WITH HIS WILL OR DESPITE IT--"
BY SHAKSA!
--INTO YET A THIRD PLANE OF EXISTENCE, WHERE NO INNOCENT LIVES NEED BE SHED IN THE WAR THAT FATE SEEMS DETERMINED WE SHOULD WAGE!
ARRRH! HOW DARE YOU PLUCK ME FROM MY MOMENT OF TRIUMPH! I WILL RIP YOU TO PIECES, MEDDLER--
--AND FEED YOUR ENTRAILS TO THE DEMONS OF RANG-SABB!


WHILE IN THE HALL OF THE SIBYLS...
I'VE NEVER FELT SUCH POWER BEFORE! IT'S AS THOUGH MY TRUE POTENTIAL WERE BEING REALIZED FOR THE FIRST TIME.
AND I LOVE IT!
IT IS DONE, MY SISTERS! THE LINK IS COMPLETED!
HEAR ME, APOLLO! HEAR ME, DIANA! WE ARE READY TO SERVE AS YOUR WEAPON, TO DESTROY THE BLACK ORACLE! USE US NOW!
NOW!
NOW!
THE CAVERN CRACKLES AND ROARS TO THE PLAY OF ARCANE FORCES, CAUSING CLEA TO TENSE, AND FOR THE FIRST TIME TO WONDER ABOUT--
STEPHEN...?
BUT THE MASTER MAGE IS BUSY ELSE-WHERE...
XENNUS' SPELL... ENERVATING ME! HAVE TO MUSTER EVERY FIBER OF MY WILL...
...AND PUSH... IT...

..BACK!
TH-THE SPELL--REVERSING! I'M BEING FETTERED BY MY OWN INCANTATION! I-IT'S SAPPING MY STRENGTH!
YIELD, SORCERER! YOUR CAUSE IS LOST!
NEVER! YOUR WILES MAY HAVE ROBBED ME OF MY VIGOR, BUT MY MENTAL ABILITIES ARE UNIMPAIRED!
I CAN STILL CAST SPELLS FROM THIS REALM--
--INTO YOURS! THE NEW SIBYL IS THE MOST VULNERABLE AND WHEN I CRUSH HER SOUL, THE SIBYLLINE TRIAD, WILL BE BROKEN!
IN THE CAVERN, WHITE PAIN...
...WHILE IN ELSEWHERE, BLACK RAGE!
ENOUGH, WIZARD! YOU'VE MISJUDGED YOUR POWER AND MINE!
BY THE HOARY HOSTS OF HOGGOTH, I NOW BANISH YOU TO A PLANE WHERE YOU'LL NOT HARM ANYONE-- EVER!
LIKE SCABS, VILE CURSES FORM ON XENNUS' LIPS, ONLY TO FADE WITH HIM INTO DARKNESS... AND OBLIVION!
IMMEDIATELY, DOCTOR STRANGE RETURNS TO THE HALL OF THE SIBYLS, WHERE...
BY THE VIPERS OF VALTORR, IF I'M NOT TOO LATE--
--NO! THE ENERGY AURA IS FADING! AND I SENSE CALM ON THE HIGHER LEVELS!
THE REALITY NEXUS HAS BEEN CLOSED!
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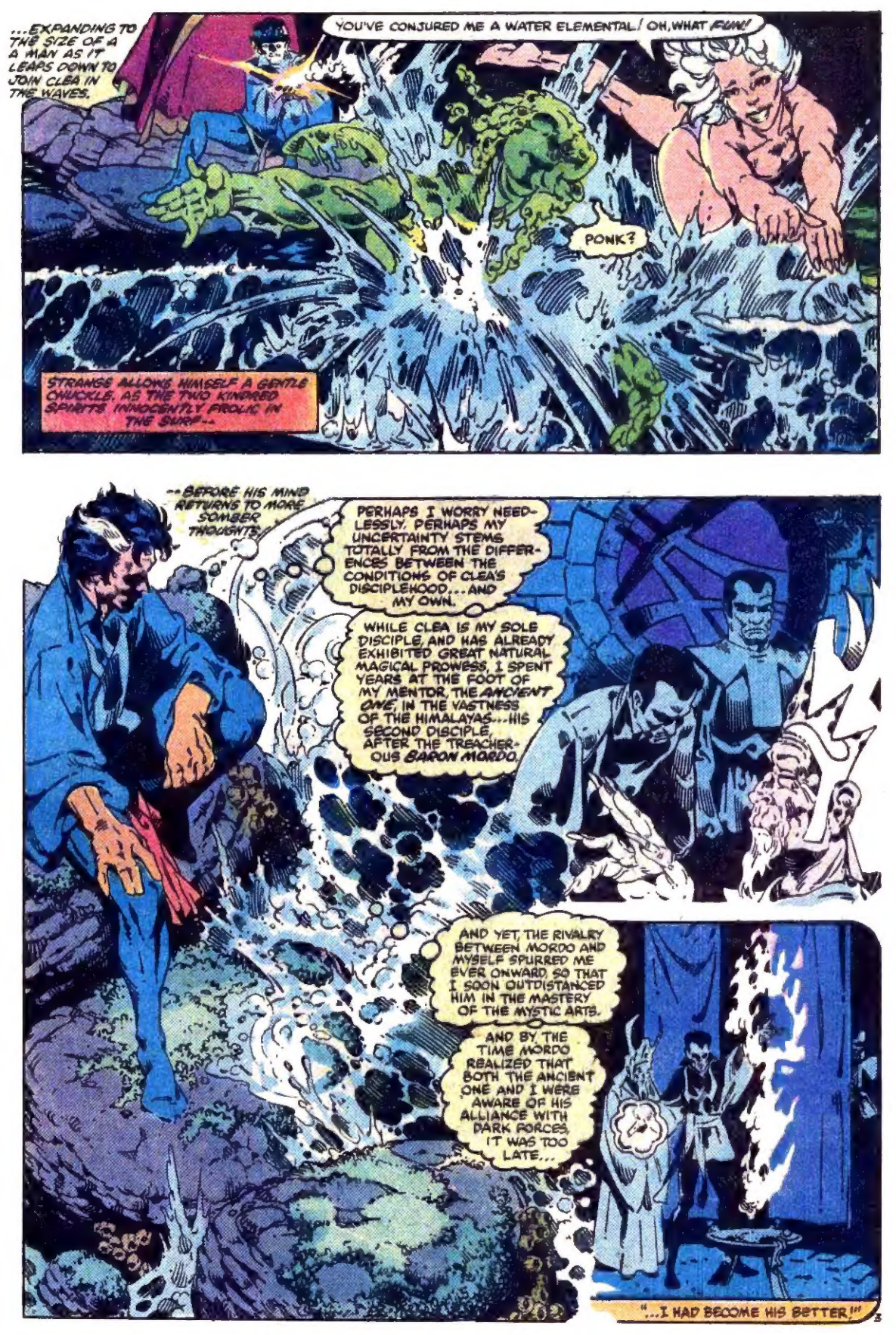
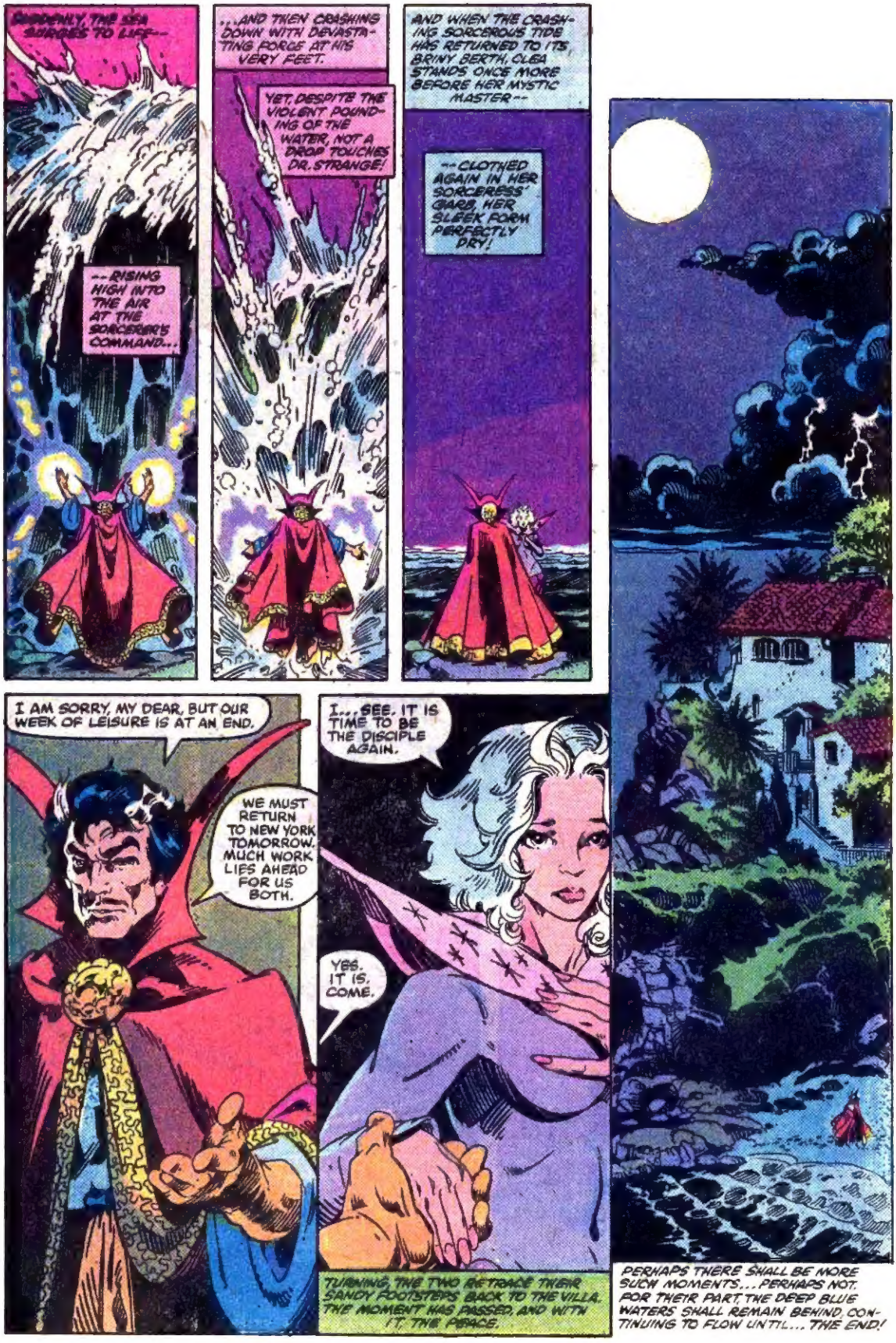
YOU WERE MAGNIFICENT, CLEA! I'M SO PROUD OF YOU. BUT ARE YOU HURT?
I'M A BIT TIRED, STEPHEN, BUT I FEEL WONDERFUL!
YOU ARE AN EXCEPTIONAL WOMAN, MY DEAR. IF YOU WOULD CONSIDER STAYING, SO THAT I MIGHT TUTOR YOU...?
I'M FLATTERED, SIBYLLA, REALLY. BUT I ALREADY HAVE AN INSTRUCTOR-- AND I'M QUITE CONTENT WITH HIM.
SO BE IT, THEN. YOU SHALL BE RETURNED TO THE OUTSIDE WITH UTMOST EXPEDIENCY... AND WITH THE GRATITUDE OF THE GODS.
THE SHIMMERING FIGURES FADE.
...AS INSIDE THE CAVERN, A HOLLOW WIND BLOWS. THALEIA HAS BEEN REDEEMED, HER SPIRIT FREED AND SIBYLLA--
--HER JOB ON EARTH DONE, SMILES, WHISPERING SOFT WORDS TO APOLLO, AND JOINS HER SISTER... IN DUST--
--AND IN DESTINY.
KRRUBUB ARRUMBLE
AS A FINAL GESTURE, THE CAVE ON MT. GAURUS IS SEALED--
--AND LIFE GOES ON...
FIN
NEXT
KONN, Master of ILLUSIONS!

THE DEEP BLUE WATERS OF THE MEDITERRANEAN LAP UP AGAINST THE ROCKY SHORELINE IN FRONT OF A REMOTE VACATION VILLA, NOT FAR FROM THE SOUTH OF ROME.
HERE, DR. STRANGE AND CLEA HAVE SPENT THE PAST WEEK RESTING AND ENJOYING...
A MOMENT'S PEACE
PLEASE, STEPHEN! IT'S SO BALMY AND BEAUTIFUL... JOIN ME IN A MOON-LIGHT SWIM!
NOT TONIGHT, MY DEAR. GO AHEAD... ENJOY THE WATERS IF YOU WISH. THERE IS MUCH I MUST REFLECT UPON.
ROGER STERN - WORDS
MICHAEL GOLDEN - PENCILS/COLORS
P. CRAIG RUSSELL - INKS
JOE ROSEN - LETTERS
M. JO DUFFY - EDITOR
JIM SHOOTER - MAGUS
OH, POOH! STEPHEN STRANGE, YOU CAN BE SUCH A STICK-IN-THE-MUD!
STAY HERE AND MEDITATE... SEE IF I CARE!
THE WAVES BECKON TO ME, AND I WILL NOT IGNORE THEM!
WITH A SINGLE MYSTIC PASS, THE SILVER-HAIRED SORCERESS TRANSFORMS HER ATTIRE INTO SOMETHING MORE BEFITTING A ROMP IN THE WARM WATERS--

--WHILE HER EARTHLY LOVER STAYS BEHIND ON THE ROCKY SHOALS.
SHE IS SO LIGHT-HEARTED, SO CAREFREE. I WISH THE HOLIDAY COULD LAST FOREVER FOR HER.
BUT SUCH IS NOT THE CASE, SUCH CAN NEVER BE. TIME IS A HARSH TYRANT, EVER STEALING THE QUIETER MOMENTS AWAY FROM US.
DR. STRANGE'S HEART IS UNUSUALLY HEAVY AS HE COMMANDS HIS CLOAK OF LEVITATION TO HANG CLOSE BY IN THE GENTLE BREEZE, AND SEATS HIMSELF UPON THE ROCKY OUTCROPPING.
THESE PAST FEW DAYS HAVE BEEN WONDERFUL. EVEN A SORCERER SUPREME NEEDS AN OCCASIONAL VACATION.
AND YET, THIS TIME ALONE WITH CLEA HAS ONLY AWAKENED MORE QUESTIONS IN MY MIND... ABOUT THE DUALITY OF OUR RELATIONSHIP.
OH, STEPHEN, DON'T LOOK SO SOLEMN!
SPLOOSH
WHU--WHAT?!
HA-HA-HA! I'M SORRY FOR THAT FACEFUL OF WATER, BUT YOU DESERVED IT!
YOU WERE BROODING AGAIN, AND THE NIGHT'S TOO LOVELY FOR BROODING.
IT'S NO FUN SWIMMING ALONE! COME, JOIN ME... PLEASE?
IT WOULD APPEAR THAT MY DISCIPLE IS PART WATER-SPRITE! NO, CLEA... AS I SAID, I WILL NOT SWIM TONIGHT.
STILL, THERE IS NO REASON FOR YOU TO SWIM ALONE.
ALLOWING THE WATER TO DRIP OFF HIS FACE AND POOL UP IN HIS OPEN PALM, STEPHEN STRANGE SILENTLY MOUTHS AN ARCANE SPELL WHICH WAS OLD WHEN THIS SEA WAS NEW.
AND A TINY BEING SEEMS ALMOST TO BEAD UP IN HIS HAND...


...EXPANDING TO THE SIZE OF A A MAN AS IT LEAPS DOWN TO JOIN CLEA IN THE WAVES.
YOU'VE CONJURED ME A WATER ELEMENTAL! OH, WHAT FUN!
PONK?
STRAMSE ALLOWS HIMSELF A GENTLE CHUCKLE, AS THE TWO KINDRED SPIRITS INNOCENTLY FROLIC IN THE SURF--
--BEFORE HIS MIND RETURNS TO MORE SOMBER THOUGHTS!
PERHAPS I WORRY NEEDLESSLY. PERHAPS MY UNCERTAINTY STEMS TOTALLY FROM THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE CONDITIONS OF CLEA'S DISCIPLEHOOD... AND MY OWN.
WHILE CLEA IS MY SOLE DISCIPLE, AND HAS ALREADY EXHIBITED GREAT NATURAL MAGICAL PROWESS, I SPENT YEARS AT THE FOOT OF MY MENTOR, THE ANCIENT ONE, IN THE VASTNESS OF THE HIMALAYAS... HIS SECOND DISCIPLE, AFTER THE TREACHEROUS BARON MORDO.
AND YET, THE RIVALRY BETWEEN MORDO AND MYSELF SPURRED ME EVER ONWARD, SO THAT I SOON OUTDISTANCED HIM IN THE MASTERY OF THE MYSTIC ARTS.
AND BY THE TIME MORDO REALIZED THAT BOTH THE ANCIENT ONE AND I WERE AWARE OF HIS ALLIANCE WITH DARK FORCES, IT WAS TOO LATE...
"...I HAD BECOME HIS BETTER!"

COULD I BE SUBCONSCIOUSLY HARBORING A JEALOUSY THAT CLEA HAS SO QUICKLY SHOWN SUCH MAGICAL SKILL?
NO, THAT IS NOT THE ANSWER! CLEA CAME TO THIS EARTH FROM ANOTHER DIMENSION... A REALM IN WHICH MAGIC IS AS DOMINANT AS IS SCIENCE IN THIS REALITY!
THE PROBLEM LIES IN THE FACT THAT WE ARE MAN AND WOMAN--
--AS WELL AS MASTER AND DISCIPLE. ALL TOO OFTEN, ONE SET OF ROLES MUST YIELD TO THE OTHER. THUS FAR, OUR SHARED RELATIONSHIPS HAVE BEEN MANAGEABLE. BUT IT CAN NEVER BE EASY... FOR EITHER OF US.
CLEA! THE HOUR GROWS LATE. IT IS TIME TO COME IN.
OH, DON'T BE SUCH A SPOILSPORT! THE EVENING IS STILL YOUNG AND I FEEL LIKE I COULD SWIM THE NIGHT AWAY!
BIRRK!
CLEA! THE TIME FOR PLAY IS OVER!
SPLOOSH
OH!
GURRK?
WITH A SINGLE BOLT OF BEDEVILMENT, STRANGE DISPERSES THE WATER ELEMENTAL, RETURNING ITS SUBSTANCE TO THE SEA WHICH SPAWNED IT!
AND THEN THE MAGE BRINGS HIS HANDS TOGETHER IN MYSTIC GESTURE, AND THE NIGHT SKIES BURN WITH ELDRITCH ENERGIES!
MAY THE MIGHTY LIGHT OF NIRVALON NOW BEND THE FLOWING SEA! HEED MY POWER, GREAT POSEIDON, AND LET WHAT WAS, 'GAIN BE!


SUDDENLY, THE SEA SURGES TO LIFE--
--RISING HIGH INTO THE AIR AT THE SORCERER'S COMMAND...
...AND THEN CRASHING DOWN WITH DEVASTATING FORCE AT HIS VERY FEET.
YET, DESPITE THE VIOLENT POUNDING OF THE WATER, NOT A DROP TOUCHES DR. STRANGE!
AND WHEN THE CRASHING SORCEROUS TIDE HAS RETURNED TO ITS BRINY BERTH, CLEA STANDS ONCE MORE BEFORE HER MYSTIC MASTER--
--CLOTHED AGAIN IN HER SORCERESS' GARB, HER SLEEK FORM PERFECTLY DRY!
I AM SORRY, MY DEAR, BUT OUR WEEK OF LEISURE IS AT AN END.
WE MUST RETURN TO NEW YORK TOMORROW. MUCH WORK LIES AHEAD FOR US BOTH.
I... SEE. IT IS TIME TO BE THE DISCIPLE AGAIN.
YES. IT IS. COME.
TURNING, THE TWO RETRACE THEIR SANDY FOOTSTEPS BACK TO THE VILLA. THE MOMENT HAS PASSED, AND WITH IT, THE PEACE.
PERHAPS THERE SHALL BE MORE SUCH MOMENTS... PERHAPS NOT. FOR THEIR PART, THE DEEP BLUE WATERS SHALL REMAIN BEHIND, CONTINUING TO FLOW UNTIL... THE END!